



Mary Skinner

14th District State Representative

Senior Citizen Legislative Report

November 2001

Call if you need assistance!

Getting the run-around from a state agency? Have a concern about property taxes, rising rents, problems with state health coverage or long-term care? Maybe I can help. Drop me a line telling me about your situation, or pick up the phone.

My office address at the state Capitol is: P.O. Box 40600, Olympia, WA 98504-0600. Phone number is: (360) 786-7810. You may also use the toll-free legislative hotline at: 1-800-562-6000.

My legislative assistant, Lora Steward, works full-time in Olympia. She can help answer your questions about the legislative session, help you work with state agencies, or schedule an appointment with me.

I'm here to serve you as well as represent you. Let me know how I can help!

Dear Neighbors,

How rapidly life has changed for all of us within the last two months! While the international events are out of our direct control here in Washington, they are having a tremendous impact on our state economy and state government. Our leaders in state government are doing everything they can to support President Bush as he responds to this threat to our nation. We also are working at the state level to ensure the safety of our citizens at home, including preparedness of our health-care system as well as emergency services.

Senior citizen concerns remain among my top priorities in the Legislature. This past year, I was appointed as co-vice chair of the House Health Care Committee. In addition, I was selected last May to serve as the chair of the Committee on Aging for the Council of State Governments-WEST (CSG-WEST), a nonpartisan organization of Western state legislators. In these positions, I have been working on issues vital to senior citizens, such as long-term care, prescription drugs, Medicaid-related topics, and access to health care.

Many issues in the latest legislative session will have an impact on senior citizens in our community. This newsletter provides a brief report on these important legislative issues.

I want you to know that your calls and letters to my office are very much appreciated. I'd like to encourage you to continue communicating with me. If you have a question, comment or suggestion, feel free to contact my office.

Sincerely,

Mary Skinner

Mary Skinner
State Representative



Representative **Mary Skinner** • 14th District

Progress for seniors in the state budget

We all have to budget carefully in our daily lives. Many of our seniors who pay taxes are on fixed incomes. I believe taxpayers' money should be spent wisely, ensuring that every efficiency is met and every dollar is accountable. That often means making tough choices and setting priorities.

I believe one of state government's top priorities must be helping senior citizens. I worked this year in the House Health Care Committee to ensure that our seniors would have access to safe, quality health care.

Meeting the long-term care needs of seniors was an important part of the state operating budget. Although I voted against the budget for other reasons, I was pleased that the final spending plan contained many victories for seniors, including:

- Funding to increase nursing services for individuals living in their own homes.
- A wage increase for long-term care workers.
- Funding to increase the average daily nursing home rate by nearly 10 percent.
- Funding to pay higher rates to boarding homes that provide specialized mental services.
- Authorization to develop two Medicaid waiver programs to serve medically needy individuals in home and community settings.

Additionally, we were able to stop proposed reductions in the adult day health program. This is an important victory for the many seniors in our community who rely on this program.

Making safe, quality long-term care a leading priority

I remain deeply concerned about the number of seniors in our community who may not be receiving the long-term care they so desperately need. Just as important, we need to ensure the safety and well-being of long-term care patients no matter where they reside.

This year, I co-prime sponsored bipartisan legislation to strengthen Washington's long-term care program. The legislation I introduced which passed included:

- **House Bill 1320** - Includes higher standards and qualifications for those desiring to become a licensed adult family home provider.
 - **House Bill 1426** - Revamps a voluntary quality improvement program for boarding homes so that more providers will participate. The program is administered by the Department of Social and Health Services.
 - **House Bill 2041** - Provides new protection standards for residents in boarding homes and adult family homes.
- In addition, I supported other legislation which passed to help those who need long-term care, including:
- **House Bill 1341** - Expands access and controls costs for those who otherwise have no alternatives to nursing home placements.
 - **Senate Bill 5184** - Authorizes the Aging and Adult Services Administration to share the results of Adult Protective Services investigations with prospective employers of caregivers in an effort to reduce and prevent abuse.



Help with skyrocketing utility bills

No one was spared from skyrocketing electricity bills this past year. That's why the Legislature approved \$1 million in state funds for low-income energy assistance and authorized expenditure of an additional \$4 million in federal funds through the Low-Income Heating Energy Assistance Program.

The money from this program will be available almost immediately for the families and seniors who are being hit hard by rising energy costs this winter and next spring. Those families and individuals who might qualify for low-income energy assistance can contact their local utility or community action network.

Senior Citizen Legislative Report

House Health Care Committee hears from Yakima citizens

With revenues declining due to the downturn in our economy, lawmakers will face some serious challenges in the state budget when the Legislature convenes in January. While many state services are bracing for reductions, I have serious concerns about many of our health-care providers now operating under razor-thin margins. That's why I helped to organize and host a meeting of the House Health Care Committee last month in Yakima.

Committee members will be making some important decisions in the coming months concerning Medicaid coverage, hospital reimbursement levels, and funding of long-term care. I wanted to make sure the committee saw firsthand the challenges many of our local providers face, as well as the innovations and commitment our community has made to provide quality health care.

On October 18, the Health Care Committee toured several health care facilities in Yakima, including Children's Village, Central Washington Comprehensive Mental Health, Yakima Neighborhood Health Services, Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic, Yakima Valley Memorial Hospital, and Providence Yakima Medical Center.

That evening in a public hearing, we listened to doctors, dentists, nurses, farm and migrant workers, and of course, senior citizens — many of whom are concerned that the health care system is working without a safety net for patients and providers. We heard that the local hospitals have incredibly small operating margins and that any legislation affecting those budgets could have huge financial repercussions.

I was glad the committee could hear a different perspective from citizens on the east side of the state. I believe it will make a large difference as we begin to deliberate health care policy issues next session.

In addition, I was recently named to serve on the Legislature's nursing home task force — a committee that makes recommendations regarding nursing home budget and policy issues. My goal is to protect vital services for our seniors as we work out budget issues.



Rep. Mary Skinner kicked off a tour of the House Health Care Committee in Yakima with a news conference involving local hospital and medical officials.

Access to affordable prescriptions

People should never have to make the choice between buying groceries or paying for their prescription drugs. Unfortunately, that's a choice being forced upon many low-income seniors on fixed incomes. The high cost of prescription drugs has become unbearable for many.

This year, I helped to introduce a comprehensive package of bills aimed at providing prescription assistance to senior citizens. The first measure would have established a senior pharmacy assistance program for low-income seniors. The second bill would have established a medication outreach program to help seniors obtain prescription drugs. The third bill would have requested that Congress add a prescription drug benefit to Medicare.

Unfortunately, none of these proposals made it through the Legislature.

Affordable prescriptions remain a top concern of mine. It was the main topic of discussion during a Council of State Governments' conference on aging I chaired last summer in Whistler, British Columbia. We heard from other states that are working to address this issue.

Although Washington faces some particular budget challenges this year, this legislation will remain a priority in the coming 2002 session.

Representative **Mary Skinner** • 14th District

Are you getting the property tax breaks you deserve?

If you are a property owner, you may have found yourself digging deep into your pocket last month to pay the second half of this year's property tax statement. Did you know that qualifying senior citizens are eligible to receive property tax exemptions?

You may qualify for a property tax exemption if you meet all of the following criteria:

- You are at least 61 years of age or disabled.
- You own and live in a single-family home, mobile home or condominium.
- You have a combined household income not exceeding \$30,000.

Qualifying citizens are entitled for property tax exemptions on their principal residence and up to one acre of land. You are eligible for the following exemptions if your combined household income falls within the range indicated:

Income

\$24,001 to \$30,000

\$18,001 to \$24,000

\$18,000 or less

Exemption

All excess levies (such as special school levies)

All excess levies and regular levies on the greater of \$40,000 or 35 percent of assessed valuation (maximum \$60,000)

All excess levies and regular levies on the greater of \$50,000 or 60 percent of assessed valuation.

If you are 60 years of age or retired because of physical disability, and your disposable income is \$34,000 or less, you may qualify for property tax deferrals. Check with the Yakima County Assessor's office for more details.

How to apply for property tax relief

For information on property tax exemptions and deferrals, call the county assessor:

Yakima County (509) 574-1100

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